

BETWEEN NATIONS AND CULTURES: THE DIASPORIC DILEMMA IN *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the struggle for maintaining a balance between the demand of conformity to the new land and the urge to retain their ethnic identity in a foreign land that is carried out on two differing levels by two generations of migrants in the autobiographical fiction, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston. It shows how the adult immigrants' strong sense of ethnic identity can operate as an obstacle to their cultural adjustment in a new country through the character of the protagonist's mother, Brave Orchid. Kingston wants most to identify herself as an individual who lives in America with very few ties to China. But her attempt to distance herself from her Chinese heritage entangles her more in a cultural and ethnic dilemma. She is antagonistically positioned in her relation with her own mother, leading to a more poignant subjective problematic. The paper tries to analyse how the emotional distance between herself and her Chinese born parents turns out to be a postcolonial diasporic condition. The novel also speaks about the positive attempt on the part of Kingston in resolving this dichotomy.

KEYWORDS: Immigration, Chineseness, Hybrid, Ethnicity, Homeland

INTRODUCTION

The Woman Warrior Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts by Maxine Hong Kingston portrays the struggle of immigrants to survive in an adopted land and their efforts to maintain a balance between the demand of conformity in public life and the urge to retain their ethnic identity in a multi ethnic nation like America. It also explores the psycho-social experiences of the migrants before and after the migration, at the same time highlighting the agency available to women despite the constraints imposed on them. Strengthening the belief that ethnicity can serve as an asset not as a liability to progress in a pluralistic society the novel espouses the view that by redefining the past and reconstituting the present one can make borders fuzzy, transforming them into spaces for contact, into inter-zones for co-construction of meaning. Ethnic identity often refers to an individual identification with, or a sense of belonging to a certain cultural community. The two countries are very different from each other in terms of historical experiences, national sovereignty, territorial locations, and cultural traditions and symbols like language, religion and ethnicity. Ethnic identity can be a clear manifestation of differences in national traditions and circumstances among people of Asian countries.

In some cases, ethnic identity might be indistinguishable from national identity. Ethnic identity appears to make up not only their core social identity, but also an important part of their self-concept. Adult immigrants' strong sense of ethnic identity can operate as an impediment to their cultural adjustment in a new country. In individualistic societies like the United States, people are often encouraged to assert themselves, evaluate themselves positively or to separate themselves from others; on the other hand, people in Eastern cultures often regard themselves less positively, or more critically, than do people in western cultures in order to achieve relationship harmony with others through self-control and

self-restraint.

Immigration is a critical life event for anyone who has experienced it and they are destined to “live ‘border lives’ on the margins of different nations, in-between contrary homelands” (McLeod 217). In a new country, immigrants are more inclined to experience stress related to marital problems, cultural readjustment, a sense of isolation, and so forth. Due to failing crops and a poor domestic economy, many of the men from the ancestral village in China were forced to leave their farms to seek work, travelling as far as America, which the Chinese nicknamed “Gold Mountain” because the original Chinese immigrants initially perceived it as a bountiful land where a good living could be made working in the gold-mining industry. Kingston’s rewriting her mother’s talk-story in the novel as her own indicates an important element in her reconciling her Chinese past and her American present: She learns the talk-story by listening to her mother. In this way, continuity is established between her mother, who represents the cultural traditions of China, and herself as a first-generation Chinese American.

Young Kingston does not even understand what her mother Brave Orchid alludes to when she chides her daughter, “Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village” (17). She is referring to the family village in China. As many immigrants considered their sojourn in America to be temporary, Kingston’s parents might have discussed returning with their family to their village in China, which would have confused the young girl trying to fit into an American culture but hearing stories only about China. The greater Kingston tries to distance herself from her Chinese heritage, the more she realizes just how affected she has become from listening to her mother’s talk-stories about her female ancestors. Although she wants most to identify herself as an individual who lives in America and who has very few ties to China, nevertheless she admits, “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet (29).” As an adult Kingston continues to struggle with “dragons”, the paradoxes in life. The concept about ‘home’ are differently constructed between the first generation and second generation migrants. “Migrants can share both similarities and differences with their descendants, and the relationship between generations can be complex and overlapping, rather than forming a neat contrast” (McLeod 213). Kingston describes her pain about the emotional distance between herself and her Chinese born parents through these words:

“When I visit the family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; I am worthy of eating the food. From afar I can believe my family loves me fundamentally. They only say, ‘When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls, because that is what one says about daughters.’” (31)

Kingston describes her mother, Brave Orchid’s three scrolls of medical certificates, a photograph of Brave Orchid herself, and a photograph of the medical school’s graduating class. When Kingston opens the canister that contains the scrolls, the smell of China flies out, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain. The phrase “far back in the brain” suggests that her impressions of China were somehow subconsciously ingrained in her at birth, as if she could “smell” China because her mother once lived there and smelled odours that she associated with China, and then passed on these sensations to her daughter. Brave Orchid’s “spacy” look underscores the intense fear and hesitancy that many Chinese emigrants felt leaving their homeland for America. Kingston begins this section of the narrative with the word “Maybe,” which signals that she is reinterpreting her mother’s talk-story to understand better how the tale affects her own American life.

Again, China is “invisible,” a subconscious world that threatens Kingston most at night. She can smell China; she can hear China; she can even taste China; but she cannot see China for herself. In contrast, America is the observable, physical world of the every day. Left on her own to make sense of her mother’s stories, Kingston recalls one perplexing story in which Brave Orchid confronts ‘Sit Dom Kuei’ ghosts that appear as snake-like whirlwinds. Because of her limited understanding of the Chinese language, Kingston cannot translate what ‘Sit Dom Kuei’ means, except that ‘Kuei’ is the Chinese word for ghost. Kingston’s language fails her, ironically because Chinese is not her native language. Also, her inability to translate Sit Dom Kuei is another symbol of the cultural gap that separates her from her parents. Kingston begins to accept that she will need to reconcile, or learn to live with, the differences between her American life and the values and practices expected of her in her Chinese home life.

Kingston noted that even after her mother began living in America, Brave Orchid never stopped seeing her land on the other side of the oceans. It is an attempt that helps “the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Hall 117). Brave Orchid’s goal was to return someday to her Chinese ancestral village and live out her life there, but now she admits that she and Kingston’s father will never return to their homeland. Brave Orchid and Kingston perceive time differently. Brave Orchid believes that time in China is paced more slowly than in America. For her, China symbolises youth because that is where she spent the earlier years of her life. For Kingston however time is universal because geographical location is universal. We all share the same earth, no matter where on it we are physically located. Kingston exhibits concern and caring as Brave Orchid’s caregiver by helping her mother understand that China is still as much a part of her world as America is.

In the chapter ‘At The Western Palace’, Brave Orchid relates the failed assimilation into American culture of her younger sister, Moon Orchid, whose inability to adapt to a new, American way of life destines her first to insanity and then to death. In the episode in which Brave Orchid contrasts her children’s behaviour with her niece’s, she is highly critical of her children’s impatience, which she characterizes as a distinctly American trait; however, her niece’s sitting with her impresses Brave Orchid as proper, respectful, Chinese deportment. “Her American children could not sit for very long (67),” Brave Orchid muses to herself. Brave Orchid’s continuing to believe in ‘Shaman’, even after she sees how old her newly arrived, younger sister is, emphasizes how strongly ingrained are her misperceptions of her former homeland, and how wholly she identifies herself as Chinese, not Chinese American. Brave Orchid and her children’s personal interactions during her sister, Moon Orchid’s gift-giving are strained at best. The cultural gap between them is immense, in large part because Brave Orchid judges her children based on traditional Chinese manners. Another reason for the breakdown of Brave Orchid and her children’s relationship is their lack of meaningful communication.

Kingston recalls that when she was growing up, on certain occasions her mother opened the front door and mumbled something, and then opened the back door and mumbled again. Whenever the children asked her what and why she mumbled, Brave Orchid refused to interpret her actions. In addition, at the supper table, Brave Orchid always invoked silence and did not allow anyone to speak at least, not in Chinese. Kingston notes that children in other families whose parents forbade talking at the supper table created an elaborate sign language to overcome their parents’ enforced silence. She and her siblings however talked freely in English which their parents didn’t seem to hear. Brave Orchid will not master English because it symbolizes the barbarous American culture, and the children resist speaking Chinese because they want to be “American- normal.” Although Brave Orchid regularly denigrates American culture, which she views as wasteful and uncivilized, she is not immune to its effects.

One example of her relaxing the many Chinese customs with which she was raised is the American practice of hanging pictures of living relatives on walls in the house, in this case her and her husband's own portraits. No matter how much she resists the American culture around her, it affects her more than she might be willing to admit. Also, she hangs the pictures because "later the children would not have the sense to do it (73)." Moon Orchid's stay with Brave Orchid reveals how very different these two sisters are. Brave Orchid represents frugality and tradition; Moon Orchid is frivolous, extravagant, and ephemeral. Their contrasting identities are best embodied in their names: Brave Orchid is "brave"; Moon Orchid, whose name means "flower of the moon," is like a planet circling the sun, a body in orbit around her distant husband. Moon Orchid's stay with Brave Orchid and her family also exposes the ever-present cultural gap between Brave Orchid and her children. This rift is caused, in part, by Brave Orchid's failure to realize that many traditional Chinese customs are not adaptable to American culture. Brave Orchid's children find Moon Orchid's behaviour odd, as she does theirs. The running commentary that Moon Orchid provides as she follows them about the house emphasizes just how Americanized Kingston and her siblings are.

Initially, Moon Orchid suspects that Brave Orchid's children are 'animals' who live in a barbarian culture; her suspicion is confirmed when she sees them eat uncooked meat. Worse, they are "savages" who always smell like cow's milk. Moon Orchid does not realize that many Americans drink milk their entire lives, but neither do Brave Orchid's children know that in traditional Chinese society, only babies drink milk.

The episode, in which Moon Orchid unsuccessfully confronts her husband, emphasizes how important language is to personal identity. When she finally sees her husband for the first time in thirty years, his presence reduces her to silence. Ironically, her loss of language is the deciding factor in her husband's decision that she cannot fit into his American life. Any chance of a renewed personal relationship between Moon Orchid and her husband is doomed to fail because of the vast cultural differences between them. Moon Orchid's traditional Chinese upbringing has so completely conditioned her to be passive toward men, to accept unquestioningly any directive of her husband, that she cannot muster the emotional stamina needed to challenge his authority. He admits to Moon Orchid and her sister that he has "turned into a different person," and that they have become "people in a book I had read a long time ago (94)." This language difference, which symbolizes the diametrically opposed cultures in which each lives, never can be overcome.

Living with Moon Orchid becomes more difficult day by day. She makes Brave Orchid's family turn off the lights and does not let them out of her sight. Moon Orchid starts to curse the family with bad omens, and Brave Orchid concedes that her sister has gone mad. Moon Orchid is institutionalized in an asylum and soon thereafter she dies. Language again plays an important role in Moon Orchid's demise here at the end of 'At the Western Palace'. Returning to live with Brave Orchid in Stockton, Moon Orchid assures her sister that she heard Mexican ghosts talking in English about her. Ironically, Moon Orchid's decoding and penetrating the Mexican ghosts' language is similar to what Kingston was forced to do while growing up and listening to her mother's talk-stories. Only during her brief stay in the insane asylum, before she dies, does Moon Orchid regain a sense of identity through language. Speaking to Brave Orchid, she joyfully explains that she and the other female residents "understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them." For the first time since Moon Orchid emigrated from China, she feels a sense of community: "We are all women here (97)." Although 'At the Western Palace' seems less of a talk-story than the previous chapters, Kingston is strengthened by recalling Moon Orchid's struggle to assimilate in America.

In the final chapter ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’, Kingston discusses further the difficulties she experienced in growing up as a Chinese- American female. Greatest among these challenges was learning to speak English to non-Chinese people, while struggling to confront traditional Chinese culture, represented by her mother, which inhibited her efforts to integrate fully into American culture. She searches to locate a middle ground in which she can live within each of these two respective cultures; while doing so, she creates a new, hybrid identity between them. Likening herself to the knot-maker who, long ago in China, would have continued to create a special, intricate knot even after the emperor banned its being made, Kingston tests the boundaries that her mother, Chinese culture, and American culture erect to manipulate her every thought and action.

Kingston follows the brief talk-story of the outlawed knot with a discussion between her mother and herself concerning Brave Orchid’s supposedly cutting Kingston’s frenum, the membrane under the tongue that restricts the tongue’s movement. Brave Orchid understands all too well the necessity of her daughter having the power of language, and the relationship between language and personal identity. Symbolically, Brave Orchid tells Kingston that she cut her frenum so that her tongue “would be able to move in any language. You’ll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another (100).” Kingston is confronted with her first challenge to speak English while attending kindergarten, but the fear and intimidation of publicly speaking English last well into her adulthood. Kingston enjoys being silent at school, but life becomes miserable when she eventually realizes that she is expected to speak. Compounding her misery is her feeling of being bad when she is supposed to speak and cannot. The silence that Moon Orchid, Kingston, and other Chinese girls in Kingston’s school experience seems culturally based. Moon Orchid never overcomes her apprehension to speak Chinese, her native language, to her husband; the adult Kingston still struggles to speak English publicly; and the Chinese schoolgirls, although speak English sooner and more confidently than Kingston, are silent initially.

The major obstacle to Kingston’s learning to speak English is culturally based on the individual’s relationship to society. In contrast to spoken English, Chinese pronunciation appears hard and loud as Kingston later characterizes it after she becomes more consciously attuned to American speech and values. Cultural inhibition is not the only reason preventing the Chinese girls from speaking aloud. Rather, they want to be accepted as soft-spoken, American and feminine. Ironically, although they think that they are being feminine, they are, in fact, being too soft to be heard. Kingston’s and her sister’s experiences in the Chinese school again emphasize language’s power to create personal identities. Even in the Chinese school, not all of the Chinese girls manage to speak.

Kingston tells the story of one Chinese girl who is always silent. During her confrontation with the silent girl, Kingston’s deep hatred of the girl lessens as she becomes more and more aware that she and the girl are alike: Both face similar fears inherent in assimilating into a new culture: Although Kingston resolves to make the silent girl speak, her inability to do so forces her to come to terms with her own fears associated with language and personal identity. Kingston’s lack of confidence in speaking English continues into adulthood, although she admits that English is easier to speak as she gets older. Her difficulty in speaking English is mitigated by a feeling of shame about her Chinese culture and Chinese adults, who, from her Chinese-American perspective, appear unsophisticated-for example, her mother and her mother’s generation still believe in ghosts and practice traditional Chinese customs. Another reason for Kingston’s anxiety about speaking English derives from her parents’ mistrust of Americans, who, they suspect, will force them out of the country. To become more assimilated into American culture, Kingston believes that she must totally reject her “Chineseness,” traits and customs that she connects most with her mother. She also decides that she will never be a slave or a wife, both female

roles that she associates with Brave Orchid's talk-stories. When she suspects that her parents are planning to marry her off to one of the new Chinese emigrants, whom she refers to as "FOB's"- "Fresh off the Boats", she displays a behaviour that she knows the suitor will find totally unacceptable in a traditional Chinese wife.

In addition to worrying about the newly arrived Chinese emigrants, Kingston becomes concerned when a Chinese boy starts visiting the family's laundry despite its always being hot and uncomfortable. Her parents do not seem to mind the boy's visiting the laundry, Kingston suspects that they are matchmaking the two of them. Kingston's isolation from and frustration with her parents reach a climax after Brave Orchid's off-handed comment about the Chinese boy and his pornography. Kingston shouts that she has her own future plans, which do not include marrying: She plans to apply for financial scholarships to colleges because her teachers say she is very smart. In effect, she rejects her Chinese life, which she perceives as holding her back from becoming Americanized, and prefers to leave Chinese school and run for a student office at her American school and join clubs. She blames Brave Orchid for not being able to teach her English, and, even more damning, she accuses her mother of confusing her with talk-stories. Kingston and Brave Orchid's argument ends with Brave Orchid shouting 'Ho Chi Kuei'- 'Ho Chi' means 'like', and 'Kuei' means 'ghost'- at Kingston, who struggles to find meaning in the words. Chinese immigrants of Brave Orchid's generation frequently referred to their children as 'Ho Chi Kuei', or half-ghosts, an expression that implies the Chinese-born immigrants' resentment of the American-born generation's rejecting traditional Chinese culture. By confronting her mother, Kingston, for the first time in her life, discovers a strong, personal voice with which she can reconcile the competing Chinese and American cultures. She learns to exercise power over her world through the use of words and the ability to form ideas. Like Brave Orchid, she now can conquer her own ghosts using talk-stories.

At the close of the chapter, she draws on a talk-story about the legendary Chinese female poet Ts'ai Yen to demonstrate her own achievement of a delicate harmony between two competing cultures. Ts'ai Yen, the daughter of a wealthy scholar statesman, was a musician and a poet. During a village raid, she was captured by invading horsemen, whose chieftain made her his wife. For twelve years, she lived with these "barbarians" in the desert, and she even bore two children by the chieftain. Whenever the children's father would leave the family tent, Ts'ai Yen would talk and sing in Chinese to her children. Eventually she was ransomed and returned to her family so that she could remarry and produce Han-Chinese descendants. Ts'ai Yen characterizes her captors as barbarians, and Brave Orchid thinks all Americans are "barbarians"; and Ts'ai Yen, held captive for twelve years, sings about China and her Chinese family as a means to remember her cultural past; Brave Orchid's many talk-stories are her means of preserving her cultural past. However, by concentrating on Ts'ai Yen's recognition of and reconciliation with the nomads, Kingston suggests an ability to live harmoniously in both American and Chinese cultures. The talk-story implies not only Brave Orchid's recognition of American influences on her daughter, but also Kingston's own eventual acceptance of her Chinese past, which after all, "translated well."

CONCLUSIONS

Thus the memoir beautifully depicts the conflict between two generations of Chinese diasporic community living in America. The touching story of the struggle for cultural balance and assimilation is aptly and deftly placed in a hybrid genre, composed of multiple narratives. The unconventional genre of this work is characterized by meta-discursive qualities. The intersection of several mainstream and subsidiary genres and of various cultural phenomena narrated in these genres, enables the reader to get a glimpse of the multiple dimensions of diasporic existence. Strategies of fictional writing,

such as fantasy, imagination, and myth are redesigned in it. They construct a historical and cultural experience of uncertainty and multi-vocality in an immigrant context. They are engaged in a realistic portrayal of the political struggle with American racism and Chinese feudalism. In the text, fictionality constructs factuality about a subjective experience.

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